DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 362 299 PS 021 737

AUTHOR Mazur, Elizabeth; Wolchik, Sharlene
TITLE Mother-Child Communication and Acceptance Moderates Relations between Children's Appraisals and Their Adjustment to Parental Divorce.
PUB DATE Jun 93
NOTE 30p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (Chicago, IL, June 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affective Measures; *Childhood Attitudes; Cognitive Measurement; Correlation; *Divorce; Emotional Adjustment; Mother Attitudes; *Mothers; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Role; *Preadolescents

ABSTRACT

Research indicates that a secure relationship with the custodial parent buffers children from some of the negative consequences of divorce. To test the hypothesis that the quality of open communication between mothers and children as well as their perceptions of acceptance and rejection moderate children's appraisals of divorce and their psychological adjustment, a study was conducted of 79 custodial, unremarried mothers and their children, ages 9 to 12, who had experienced divorce within the previous 24 months. Participants were interviewed and administered tests measuring children's cognition about divorce, mother-child communication, subjects' perceptions of acceptance and rejection, children's psychological adjustment, and mothers' perceptions of children's behavior and competence. The study found that the relation between children's negative cognitive errors; children's self-reports of aggression, anxiety, and depression; and mothers' reports of children's academic performance were moderated by high mother-child communication. However, mothers' social support was found to be beneficial primarily for children who did not tend to make negatively biased appraisals related to divorce, and not protective of children who did. (Contains 10 references.) (BCY)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 362 299

Mother-Child Communication and Acceptance Moderates Relations between Children's Appraisals and Their Adjustment to Parental Divorce

Elizabeth Mazur

Eastern Kentucky University

Department of Psychology

102 Cammack Building

Richmond, KY 40475-3108

&

Sharlene Wolchik

Arizona State University

PS 021737

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Elizabeth Mazur

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Paper presented at the annual convention of the American Psychological Society, Chicago, IL, June 1993.

ABSTRACT

One way of understanding individual differences in children's adjustment to divorce is to examine children's appraisals about divorce-related events. Previous studies have shown that in response to hypothetical situations depicting frequent and undesirable divorce events, children's appraisal biases are significantly associated with symptoms of anxiety, self-esteem, aggression, and maternal reports of child behavior problems (Mazur, Wolchik, & Sandler, 1992). Since negativity and positivity in parenting show strong associations with children's divorce adjustment (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), we hypothesized that supportive parenting by the custodial mother moderates the relations between children's negatively and positively biased appraisals of divorce and their psychological adjustment.

Subjects were 79 custodial mothers and their children ages 9 to 12 years who had experienced parental divorce within the previous two years. Regression equations indicated that maternal reports of mother-child communication moderated the relations between children's negative cognitive errors and self-reports of aggression, anxiety, and depression, and maternal reports of children's classroom competence. Child reports of their mothers as more accepting and less rejecting moderated the relations between negative errors and antisocial conduct, and between positive illusions and academic competence. These results suggest that while an open and accepting custodial mother-child relationship does buffer some of the effects of negative divorce appraisals, such social support is not globally protective. Rather, both appraisal biases and maternal social support are powerful independent predictors of children's adjustment to divorce.

BACKGROUND

Following parental divorce, some children will experience psychological adjustment problems (Amato & Keith, 1991). One way of understanding these individual differences in adjustment is to examine children's appraisals about frequent and undesirable divorce-related events. Previous studies have shown that in response to hypothetical situations depicting frequent and undesirable divorce events, children's scores on a scale of negative cognitive errors (catastrophizing, overgeneralizing, and personalizing) are significantly associated with symptoms of anxiety, low-self esteem, and maternal reports of child behavior problems. Children's scores on a scale of positive illusions (high self-regard, illusion of personal control, and optimism for the future) are significantly associated with less self-reported aggression (Mazur, Wolchik, & Sandler, 1992).

Previous research has indicated that a secure relationship with the custodial parent may buffer the child from some of the negative consequences of divorce (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Therefore, we hypothesized that the quality of open communication between mother and child, and children's and mothers' perceptions of acceptance and rejection, may moderate the relations between children's negatively and positively biased appraisals of divorce and their psychological adjustment. Social support from custodial parents may help children in several ways. First, warm, accepting parents who are available to talk with the child about divorce-related events may allow the child the emotional security to express depression, anxiety, anger, and other emotions. Second, open communication may provide the child a model of good coping. For example, a supportive parent may provide information regarding how threatening a divorce event actually is, may suggest effective coping responses, or may help the child cope in other ways. Finally, it may be the

child's perception of emotional support that is critical in giving the child the security to cope with divorce stressors more adaptively.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

Subjects were 79 custodial nonremarried mothers and children ages 9 to 12 who had experienced parental divorce within the previous 24 months. The 38 girls and 41 boys were participants in an evaluation of a preventive intervention program for children of divorced parents, and were recruited by random sampling of petitions for marriage dissolution. In families where there was more than one child within the 9 to 12 year age range, one child was randomly selected to ensure independence of response.

On average,the parents had been separated for 2.2 years (range .5 to 7.7 years) and divorced for 1.1 years (range .2 to 2 years). The average age of the children at the time of the interview was 10.6 years (range 9.1 to 12.9 years). Mothers reported a median annual income of $20,000 to $25,000 for their families (range: less than $5,000 to $45,000-$50,000). Legal custody arrangements were 72% maternal custody and 28% joint custody, and all children lived at least half time with their mother. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the children were Caucasian, 23% were Hispanic, and 3% were African-American.

PROCEDURE

One child from each family was interviewed at home, during which time the mother was interviewed by a different interviewer in a separate room. The inventories in this study were part of a larger battery of questionnaires conducted as pre-tests to evaluate the efficacy of the intervention program. Families were paid $45.00 for their participation.

MEASURES

1. **Children's Cognitions about Divorce Scale**: Comprised of 10 short descriptions of hypothetical events that were selected from a group of representative divorce-related events previously rated as frequent and moderately to highly stressful (Sandler et al., 1986). Each description of an event was followed by 3 to 4 statements that reflected two negative cognitive errors and one or two positive illusions. The scale reflecting **negative cognitive errors** was comprised of 20 statements reflecting catastrophization, overgeneralization, personalization, and selective abstraction. The scale of **positive illusions** was comprised of 15 statements reflecting high self-regard, the illusion of personal control, and optimism about the future. Chronbach's alpha was .86 and .77 for the negative errors and positive illusions scales, respectively.

2. **Parent-Adolescent Communication**: Mothers reported on positive aspects of communication on the 10-item Open Family Communication subscale, which focuses on the freedom of the flow of factual and emotional information (Barnes & Olson, 1982).

3. **Child Report of Parental Behavior Inventory, Child and Maternal reports** (Schaefer, 1965): Acceptance and Rejection subscales were combined into 1 scale.

4. **Measures of Children's Psychological Adjustment: Child Reports**

   a. Children's Depression Inventory (Kovacs, 1981)

   b. Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale (Reynolds & Richmond, 1978)

   c. Youth Self-Report (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987) Aggression & Delinquency subscales

   Maternal Reports

   a. Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983)

b. Child Competence Scales (Coatsworth, 1992): Academic, Activity, Classroom, & Peer Competence (alpha = .84 to .88)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. As shown in Table 1, there were significant negative correlations between children's scores on the scale of **negative cognitive errors** and mothers' reports of open communication and child reports of high acceptance and low rejection. Children's scores on the scale of **positive illusions** were significantly correlated with their perceptions of high acceptance and low rejection. In addition, scores on the **negative errors** scale correlated significantly with all eight of the adjustment measures. Scores on the scale of **positive illusions** correlated significantly with less self-reported aggression and with maternal reports of fewer total behavior problems. Negative associations between **positive illusion** scores and depression nearly reached significance.

2. Scores on the measures of maternal social support significantly correlated with most of the adjustment variables, as shown in Table 2.

3. To test the extent to which maternal social support moderates the relation between children's divorce appraisals and their psychological adjustment, regression equations with centered predictor variables were developed for each adjustment variable. Interactions are displayed in Tables 3 and 4. For aggression, there was a significant **Negative Errors** X Communication interaction that indicated significant differences between the two slopes. Children whose mothers described positive, open communication in their relationship and did not endorse negative errors reported fewer symptoms of anxiety. However, open

communication did not ameliorate the effects of strong endorsement of negative cognitive errors. Similarly, for anxiety, there was a significant **Negative Errors** X Communication interaction. Children whose mothers described positive communication reported less anxiety, but, again, only under conditions of low endorsement of negative errors. For depression, the **Negative Errors** X Communication Interaction nearly reached significance. Children whose mothers described positive communication reported less depression, but, again, only when they also endorsed few negative errors. Together, these results suggest that an open, positive mother-child relationship is beneficial for children who tend not to make negatively biased appraisals but is not protective for children who strongly endorse negative cognitive errors.

For classroom competence, there was a significant **Negative Errors** X Communication interaction. Children who strongly endorsed negative cognitive errors but whose mothers reported positive communication were rated by their mothers as more competent in the classroom than those whose mothers reported poorer mother-child communication, suggesting that positive mother-child communication may serve a protective, albeit limited, function.

4. There were no significant **Positive Illusions** X Communication interactions in predicting children's divorce adjustment. Also, neither **Negative Errors** or **Positive Illusions** significantly interacted with maternal reports of acceptance and rejection to predict children's psychological adjustment.

5. However, children's reports of acceptance and rejection from their mother interacted

with **Negative Errors** to predict self-reported aggression. Children who described acceptance from their mother reported less aggression, regardless of their endorsement of negative errors, than did children who described rejection. For predicting academic competence, there was a significant **Positive Illusions** X Acceptance interaction. Children who reported higher acceptance from their mothers and strongly endorsed positive illusions were rated by their mothers as more academically competent. However, perceptions of acceptance did not ameliorate the effects of weak endorsement of positive illusions.

6. Taken together, these results suggest that buffering effects of an open and accepting custodial mother-child relationship are possible, but limited. Rather, both appraisal biases and maternal social support are powerful independent predictors of psychological adjustment to divorce. Appraisal biases may be self-fulfilling, providing children with good coping abilities the motivation and confidence to seek, receive, and remember social support. It is possible, too, that while maternal social support may facilitate successful coping efforts, well-adjusted children who appraise divorce situations adaptively are children who more easily attract open communication and acceptance from their mothers.

NEGATIVE COGNITIVE ERRORS

CATASTROPHIZING
All the kids at school will laugh at me for having to wear these old clothes.

OVERGENERALIZING
Dad will always forget about what's important to me.

PERSONALIZING
It's my fault that my parents are fighting.

SELECTIVE ABSTRACTION
I had a terrible day today.

POSITIVE ILLUSIONS

HIGH SELF-REGARD
I know my mom loves me whether or not she can come to my games.

PERSONAL CONTROL
If I call my father and tell him that I miss him, then he'll come to see me.

OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE
Someday my parents won't fight anymore.

CHILDREN'S COGNITIONS ABOUT DIVORCE SCALE

10 Hypothetical Events (2 of each):

Parental Distress
Parental Arguments
Criticism of One Parent By Other
Loss of Time With Each Parent
Noncustodial Father Misses Visits

Your mom complains to you that your father cannot be trusted.

1. *You think, "My parents won't always be so mad at each other." (Opt.)*

   This thought is:

   Almost exactly like I would think 1

   A lot like I would think 2

   Somewhat like I would think 3

   Only a little like I would think 4

   Not at all like I would think 5

2. *You think, "Everythink is ruined." (Cat.)*

   This thought is:

Table 1

Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Appraisal Biases and Maternal Social Support and Child Adjustment

Variables	Negative Errors	Positive Illusions
Social Support, child report		
Acceptance	-.23*	.33**
Social Support, mother report		
Acceptance	-.14	.10
Open Communication	-.25*	-.06
Child adjustment, child reports		
Depression	.43***	-.18+
Anxiety, total score	.27**	-.13
Antisocial conduct	.55***	-.20*
Child adjustment, mother reports		
Total behavior problems	.38***	-.24*
Academic competence	-.37**	.15
Activity competence	-.23*	.03
Classroom competence	.38***	.06
Peer competence	-.33**	.12

Note. $n = 79$. +$p < .07$. *$p < .05$ (one-tailed). **$p < .01$ (one-tailed). ***$p < .001$ (one-tailed).

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Maternal Social Support and Child Adjustment

Adjustment Variables	Child Report	Mother Report	
	Acceptance	Acceptance	Communication
Child reports			
Depression	-.38***	-.16+	-.21*
Anxiety, total score	-.23*	-.22*	-.20*
Aggresion	-.44***	-.23*	-.30**
Mother reports			
Total behavior problems	-.15+	-.54***	-.38***
Academic competence	.11	.34***	.26*
Activity competence	.04	.16+	.16+
Classroom competence	.16+	.19*	.39***
Peer competence	.14	.32**	.30**

Note. n = 79. +p <.10. *p < .05 (one-tailed). **p < .01 (one-tailed). ***p < .001 (one-tailed).

Table 3

Children's Reports of Open Communication as Moderator of the Relation Between Appraisal Biases and Adjustment

Adjustment Variable	Negative Cognitive Errors		Positive Illusions	
	Unstandardized *b* for Appraisal x Communication Term	R^2 change	Unstandardized *b* for Appraisal x Communication Term	R^2 Change
Child reports				
Depression	.02	.03+	.00	.00
Anxiety	.03	.06*	.01	.00
Aggression	.04	.06*	.02	.01
Mother reports				
Total behavior problems	.03	.01	-.02	.00
Academic competence	-2.31	.00	.01	.00
Activity competence	.01	.01	.01	.00
Classroom competence	.01	.05*	.01	.02
Peer competence	.01	.01	.01	.01

+$p < .08$ *$p < .05$ **$p < .01$

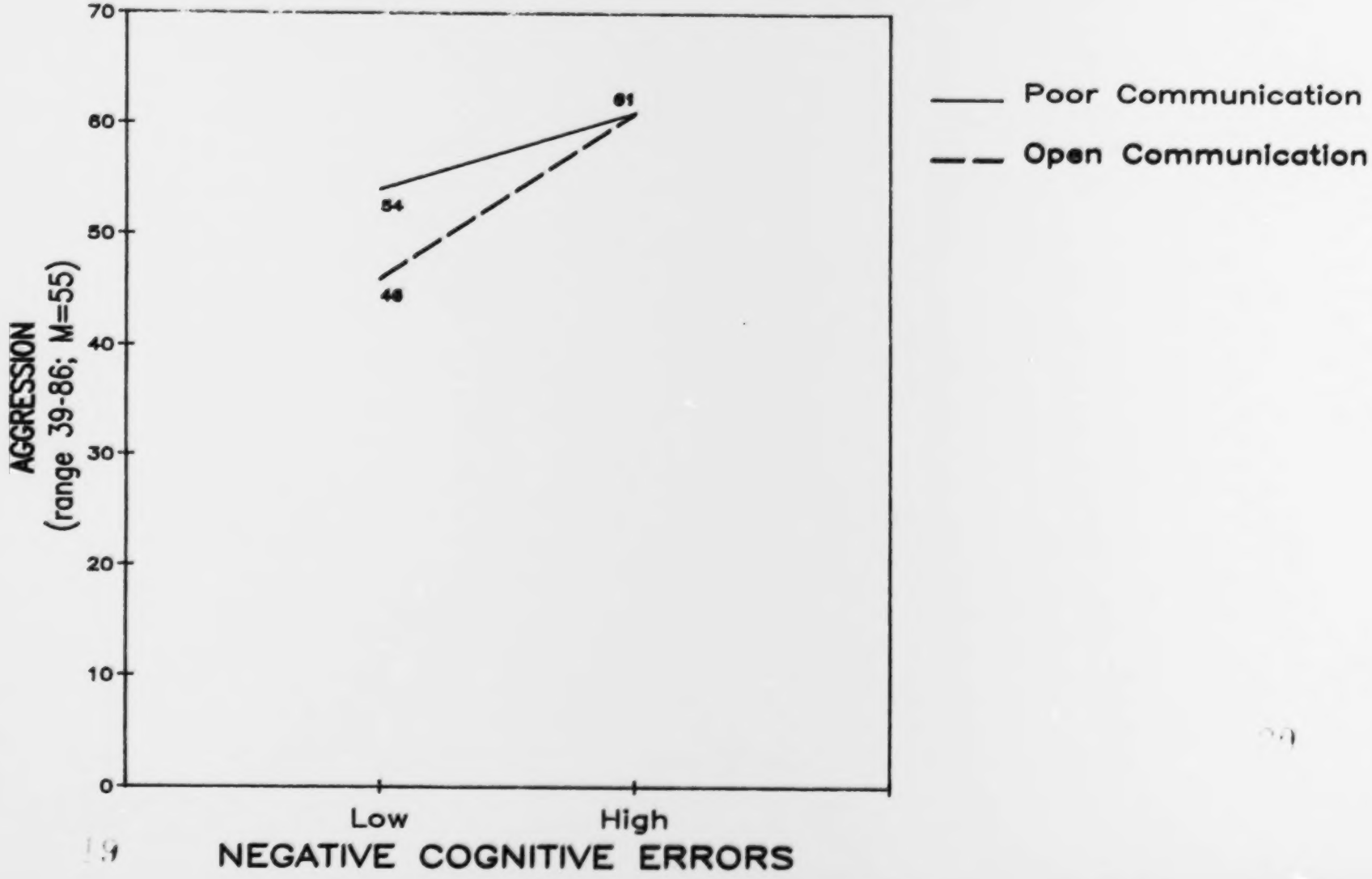
Table 4

Children's Reports of Maternal Acceptance as a Moderator of the Relation Between Appraial Biases and Adjustment

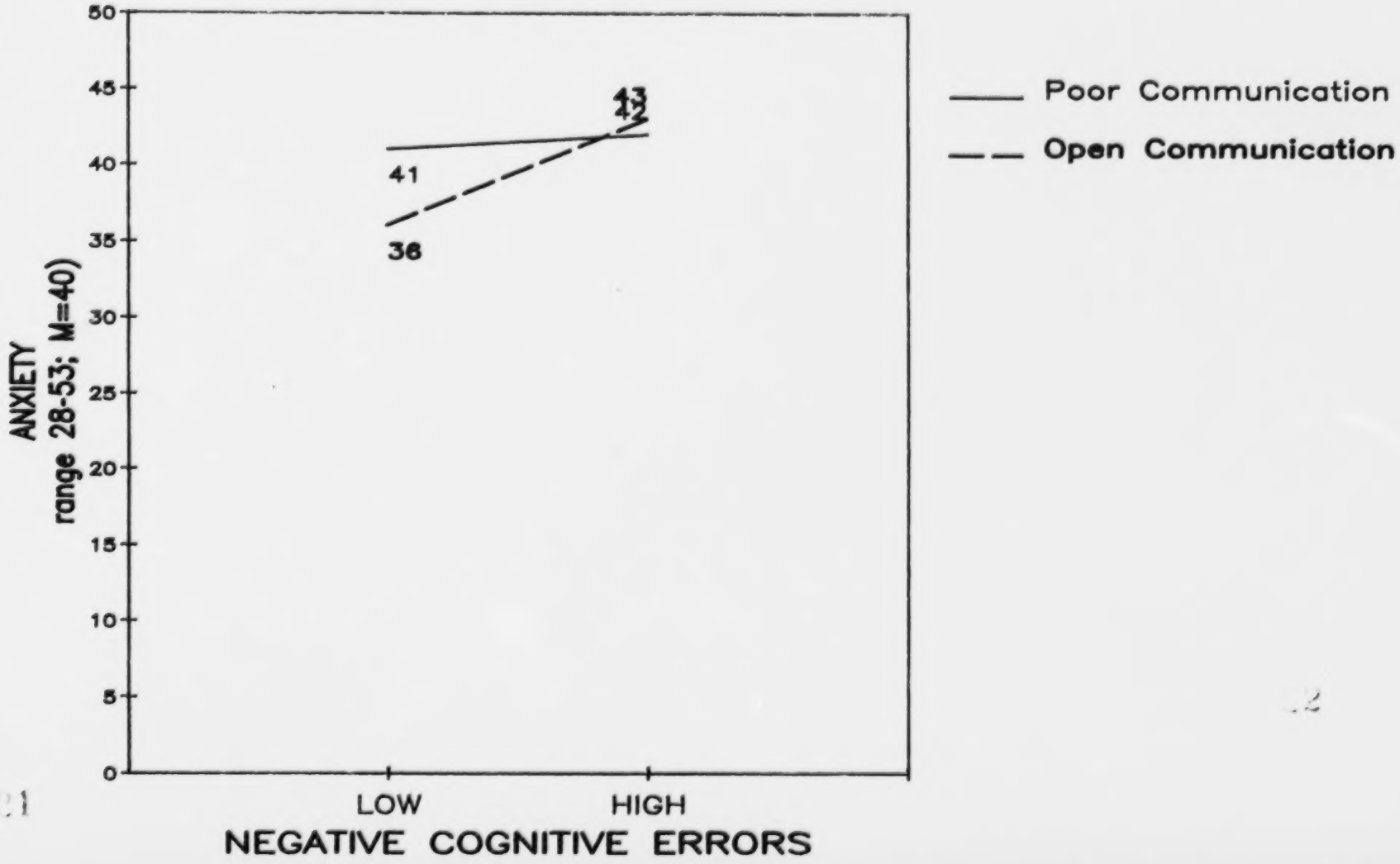
Adjustment Variable	Negative Cognitive Errors		Positive Illusions	
	Unstandardized *b* for Appraisal x Acceptance Term	R^2 change	Unstandardized *b* for Appraisal x Acceptance Term	R^2 Change
Child reports				
Depression	-.01	.02	.00	.00
Anxiety	-.01	.02	-.01	.01
Aggression	-.01	.03*	.00	.00
Mother reports				
Total behavior problems	.01	.01	-.01	.00
Academic competence	.00	.01	.01	.09**
Activity competence	.00	.00	-5.06	.00
Classroom competence	-5.14	.00	.00	.01
Peer competence	.00	.00	.00	.01

*p< .05 **p< .01

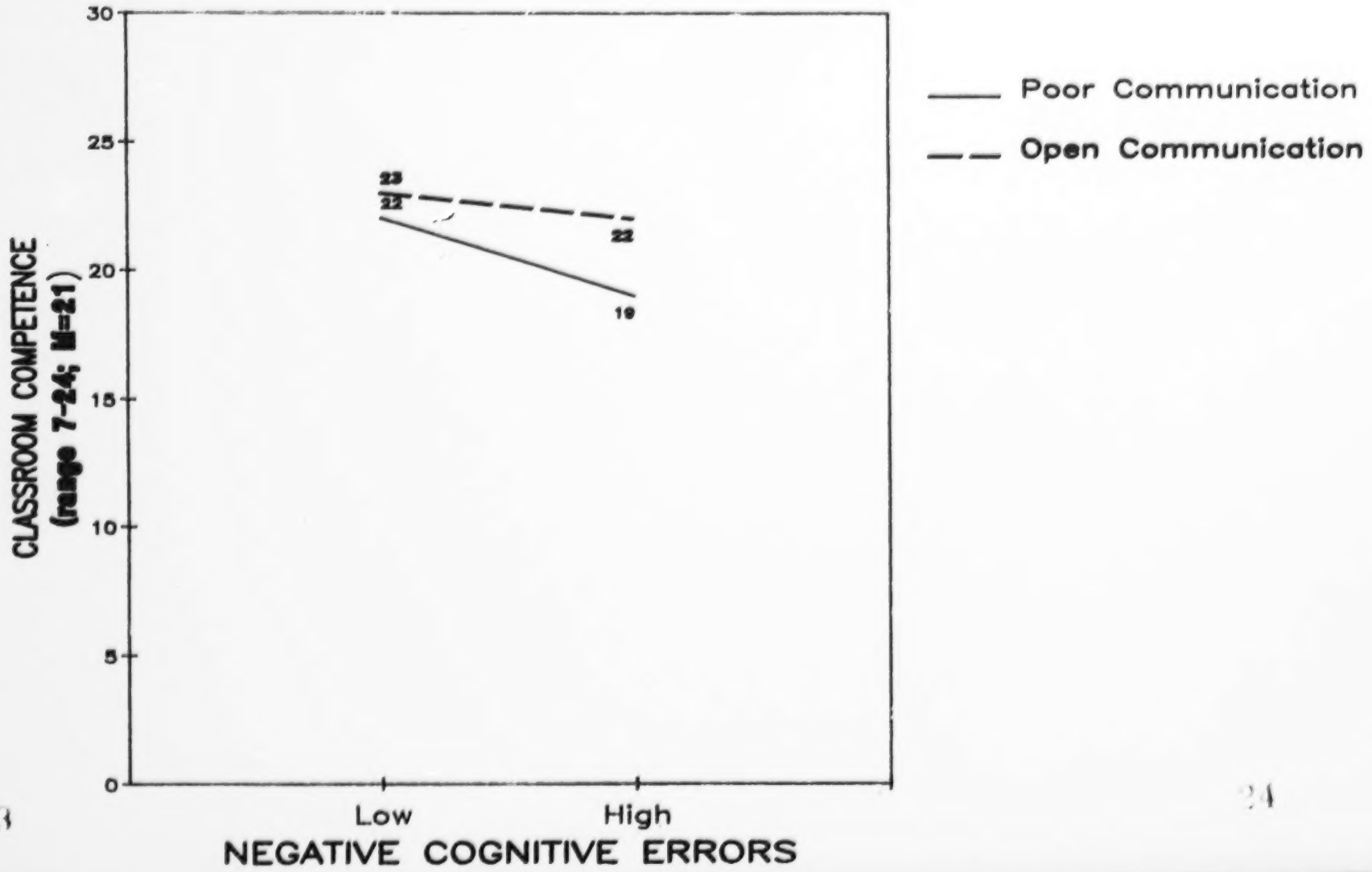
Mother-child communication moderates the relation between children's negative errors and aggression



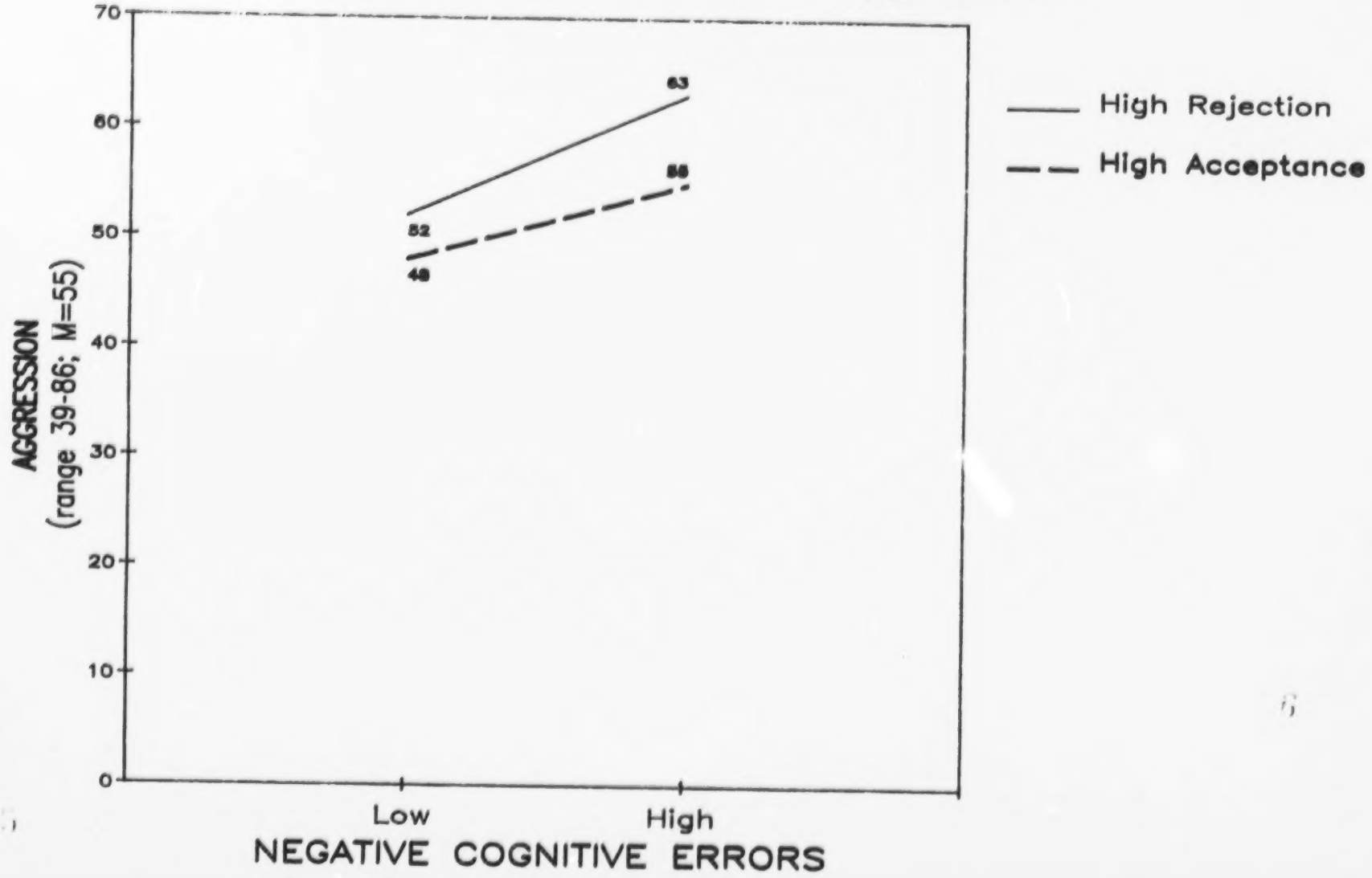
Mother-child communication moderates the relation between children's negative errors and anxiety



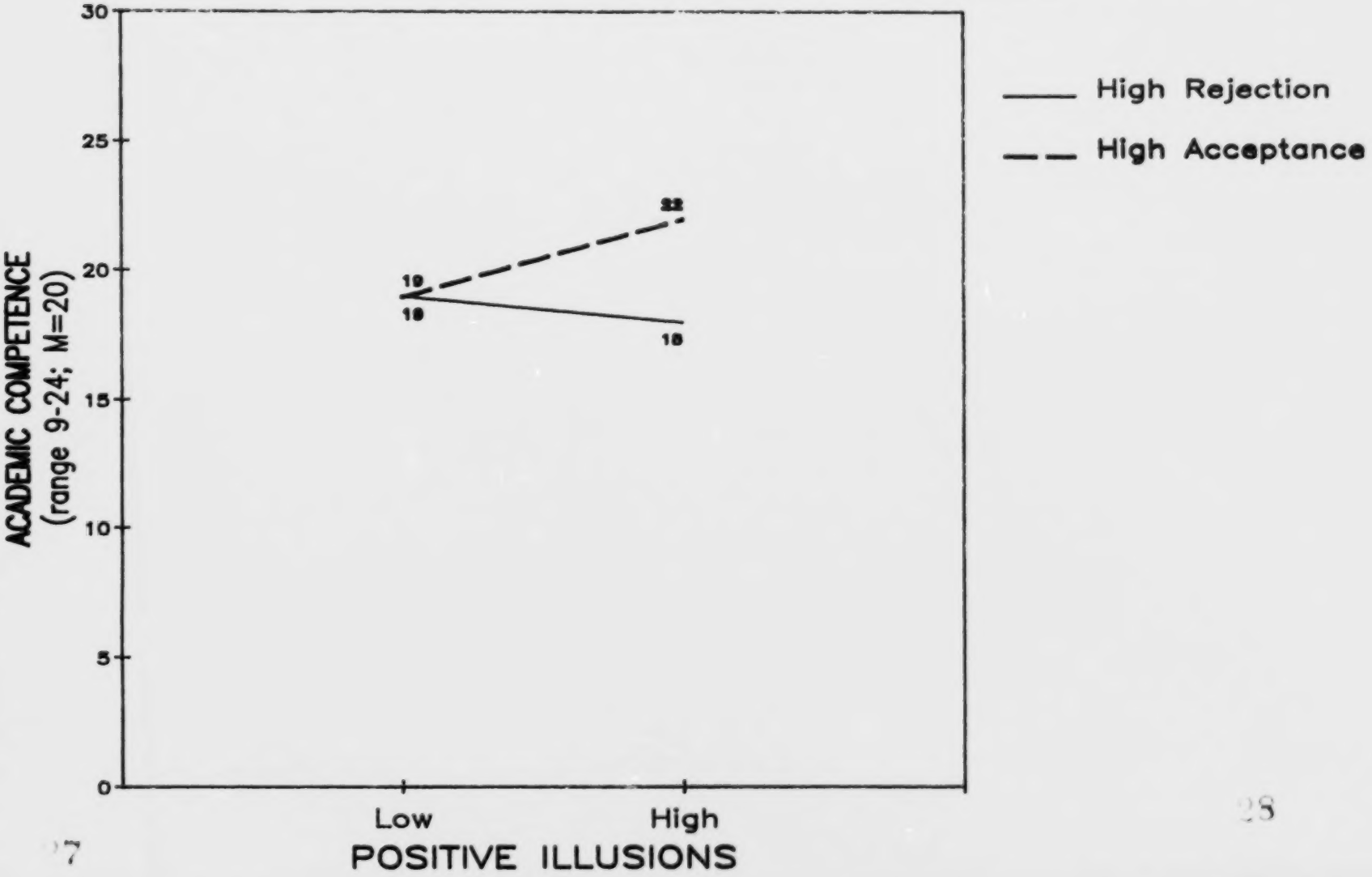
Mother-child communication moderates the relation between children's negative errors and classroom competence



Child's report of maternal acceptance moderates the relation between children's negative errors and aggression



Child's report of maternal acceptance moderates the relation between children's positive illusions & academic competence



References

Achenbach, T.M., & Edelbrock, C.S. (1983). Manual for the Child Behavior Checklist and Revised Child Behavior Profile. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Department of Psychiatry.

Achenbach, T.M., & Edelbrock, C.S. (1987). Manual for the Youth Self-Report and Profile. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Department of Psychiatry.

Amato, P. R., & Keith, B. (1991). Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta-analysis. Psychological Bulletin, 110, 26-46.

Coatsworth, D. (1992). Child Competence Scales. Unpublished manuscript, Arizona State University, Program for Prevention Research, Tempe.

Hetherington, E.M., & Clingempeel, W.G. (1992). Coping with family transitions: A family systems perspective. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 57 (2-3, Serial No. 227).

Kovacs, M. (1981). Rating scales to assess depression in school-aged children. Acta Paedopsychiatrica, 46, 301-315.

Mazur, E., Wolchik, S., & Sandler, I.S. Negative cognitive errors and positive illusions for negative divorce events: Predictors of children's psychological adjustment. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 20, 523-542.

Reynolds, C.R., & Richmond, B.O. (1978). What I think and feel: A revised measure of children's manifest anxiety. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 6, 271-280.

Sandler, I. N., Wolchik, S. A., Braver, S. L., & Fogas, B. (1986). Significant events of children of divorce: Toward the assessment of a risky situation. In S. M. Auerbach & A. Stolberg (Eds.), Crisis intervention with children and families (pp. 65-83).

Washington, D.C. Hemisphere Publishing.

Schaefer, S. S. (1965). A configuration analysis of children's reports of parent behavior. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 29, 552-567.